The Late General W. W. Foster Took a Hand in the Chase

The BLUE-EYED BANDIT

BEHIND THE WHEEL of a car, today's criminal can be a very fast worker. But never as fast as sound; the sound of the human voice, arranging the road blocks ahead, alerting those in his path.

Twenty-four years ago the "Montreal Kid", whose real name was Ronald Holdsworth, posed a problem to Vancouver's 800-odd police officers and their communication system, however.

To give an idea of the system's scope and purpose even in those days, let's go out to Vancouver's South Cambie district where you find in a big stone and brick structure (often mistaken for a church) the nerve endings of the police and fire services. Up the broad front steps and through a big plate glass door, and you show your pass. For not everyone gets in here.

Inside, blue-uniformed figures keep watch day and night, moving quietly about, pushing buttons and switches and speaking occasionally into telephones and microphones in low, unhurried tones. They speak of death, disaster, fires and crime. Occasionally from the background comes the ominous double beat of a gong, or perhaps the spasmodic chatter from rows of ticker tape machines.

Front part of the building is assigned to police use, where around the clock calls are shuttled between headquarters and scores of cruising police cars in city streets. Off at one side, at a big switchboard, sits a constable who endlessly checks off the men who call from police boxes—checks them off with a pencilled tick on a huge log sheet. The man who doesn't call is glaringly obvious on the white expanse.

It seems to be a continuous task, this changing the plug, the low "OK 148", the plug again "OK T15", as relentlessly the check marks march across the page. Just in case the watchkeeper is tempted to fill in for an absent friend, thoughtful police heads have placed under his desk a sealed ticker tape machine that automatically logs every incoming box call, with the time, date and box number!

Over at the radio console, trained announcers with a fine economy of words phrase each assignment so that "where" it is, comes before "what" it is; you get the significance when you hear him call a car and intone "In the 1200 block 8th avenue . . . boys breaking windows." It may give the man in the car time to reverse direction if he knows first where he's going. It isn't, of course, all "boys breaking windows"; there are messages that hint of danger, possibly death. Messages that include the words "is armed", or "has a gun, approach cautiously."

The fire department's control room, of ballroom dimensions, is in the middle of the building, the walls a mass of clocks, dials and switches. If at any time the city power feeding the building drops to 90 volts, a diesel engine in the basement automatically starts and picks up the load. If it fails to start, banks of Edison cells can take on the task for nine hours. All of which adds up to the fact that in any city-wide disaster, Vancouver's fire and police communication system is independent of power lines.

IN THIS HUGE ROOM a five-man shift rides herd on every city fire call whether it's telephoned or comes from any one of the city's 4,000-odd fire alarm boxes. Whenever a fire draws equipment from a downtown hall, despatchers start moving in equipment to fill the blanks. Thus a couple of trucks off to a fire might mean ten changes in equipment all over the city; all to the end that the downtown and industrial areas are 100 per cent covered.

The quiet voice at the switchboard intoning "Yes, madam, they're on their way . . . " gives no hint of the heart clutching panic at the other end of the wire; these men are schooled to calm the hysterical. Seconds later from ten feet back of you comes a clickety-click-click of a ticker machine as a paper ribbon jerks uneasily forward another inch. "On their way," says the switchboard man with a smile; for the last man aboard an outgoing truck punches a switch which registers the time and date, to the second, on one of these tape machines. Ten seconds in summer . . . 20 seconds in winter . . . "They're in bed, you see, and have to dress."

Back through the police section on your way out, you'll notice a gong near the police radio mike. It isn't used to preface every message; just major crimes, especially bank robberies. The gong alerts monitoring stations in adjacent municipalities, who in turn flash the word to their own cars on a different wavelength. Which also serves as cue for a city-wide road block, involving main highways and bridges.

So much for the system. Now for a word about the individual who challenged it.

Ronald Holdsworth, like many another young man, followed Horace Greeley's advice and came west in the summer of 1935. He came west from Montreal by train, and when he got off in Vancouver moved casually, bag in hand, through the crowded CPR waiting room, and out to a friend's car on Cordova Street. There the city swallowed him. Watchful city detectives at the depot might have glanced at him, and seen nothing unusual. For Ronald's name and description had never appeared on the local police blotter. Plenty was known of him in the east, particularly at his alma mater . . . Kingston penitentiary.

Young and broad-shouldered, he had blue eyes and fair hair, and, according to some female standards, would be handsome. Yet occasionally there was something in his look that hinted that all was not right with Ronald's mental outlook. Occasionally from the blue depths of his eyes flickered an almost psychotic flash of cold savagery.

Crime, of course, by the accident of geography or climate, call it what you will, is no mere shadowy phase of Vancouver's civic progress, and armed robbery stands high on the list of civic misdemeanors. It was in this field that Ronald excelled.

Colonel (later General) W. W. Foster was chief of police at the time, and a good one, too. Not only a distinguished soldier with overseas services, he'd once been B.C.'s deputy minister of public works, and in his spare time, an alpinist. One of the few, by the way, to climb Mount Robson in the Canadian Rockies. I'm mentioning Gen. Foster because he took a personal interest in Mr. Holdsworth's bid for fame.

There was comparative quiet on the eastern front (that part of town lying east of Main Street) that summer, but soon with the first fall fog and shorter hours of daylight, stickups would again be almost a nightly occurrence.

IT WAS DURING the second week of September that it became apparent to Vancouver's hard-working criminal investigation branch that things were picking up more than a little. There was almost organization at work, for the heists were hitting the smaller outlying stores with more than usual zeal and planning.

This is a photograph of the late Gen. W. W. Foster at about the time he was appointed chief of Vancouver police force.

Puzzling part was the speed with which they operated. Usually two men entered a store, regardless of whether it held only the proprietor or was packed with shoppers. The holdup men, often hooded and always armed, made a quick cleanup and a quick getaway, usually in a car reported stolen. A car that was invariably found abandoned. A driver waited in the car, while the holdup was carried out and the masked men who entered usually carried an automatic pistol and a sawed off shotgun. Their masks were unusual, a sort of stockinette material with eye holes, covering the features from the neck to the hat brim. The bandit's appearance, apart from the weapons they carried, was sufficient to overawe the customers.

According to the best information this "crime wave of the year" started on Sunday night, September 15, when about 10.25 two hooded and armed men shouldered their way into the Crystal Dairy at 1803 Commercial Drive, and herded three waitresses and five milk bar patrons into a corner. One of the bandits punched the cash register, scooped $227 into his pocket. Then the pair stepped outside and were gone in a car.

With the third or fourth similar robbery,